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SUBJECT: EU MOVES TOWARD JOINT RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM FOR REFUGEES

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SUMMARY

¶11. EU ministers in the September 21 Justice and Home Affairs Council broadly supported the idea of setting up a joint resettlement program for refugees from non-EU countries aimed at closer political and practical cooperation among Member States. The program would target particularly vulnerable populations from specific geographical areas such as Iraqi refugees coming from Syria and Jordan. The Council meeting, which was almost exclusively devoted to migration and asylum issues, confirmed the lack of enthusiasm on the part of Member States to take in recognized refugees now residing in Malta. Ministers also turned their attention to the problem of unaccompanied minors coming to and seeking asylum within the EU, an issue of major concern to the forthcoming Spanish Presidency. Full text of the Council conclusions is available from the Council website (<http://consilium.europa.eu>). END SUMMARY.

JOINT EU RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM

¶12. EU ministers in the September 21 JHA Council broadly supported the idea of moving toward a joint resettlement program. A Commission paper submitted to EU capitals earlier this month argues that "the impact of resettlement will be enhanced if priorities are formulated in a coordinated way at EU level." The program would only address refugees from non-EU countries and would target particularly vulnerable populations (unaccompanied women, children, disabled persons) from specific geographical areas such as Iraqi refugees from Syria and Jordan, Somalis from Kenya and Sudanese from Chad.

¶13. Following a public discussion in the Council, Swedish Minister for Migration/Council chair Tobias Billstroem told a press conference the program would be "a useful tool" and "a concrete expression of solidarity" among Member States. Billstroem made it clear many delegations wanted the program to operate on a strictly voluntary basis. The public discussion showed no concrete commitment on the part of Member States on the relocation of refugees within the EU. Apart from the ten countries already involved in national resettlement, Luxembourg, Slovakia and Hungary also expressed clear support. Austria (Interior Minister Maria Theresia Fekter) voiced the most cautious comment, stressing the bearing of resettlement programs on the external policy of the EU. Fekter insisted that ministers themselves should pronounce on "issues" -- read: the definition of priorities and choice of target groups -- for which the role of experts should be strictly limited to preparatory work. Delegations of countries most exposed to the influx of refugees from Northern Africa obviously emphasized the need for solidarity.

¶14. Commission Vice-President Jacques Barrot, responsible for Freedom, Security and Justice, told the press conference the plan was aimed at creating a framework for refugee resettlement that would make it possible to set common priorities on an annual basis. Member States resettling in accordance with those priorities would receive financial assistance of EUR 4000 per resettled person from the European Refugee Fund. Among the issues that required further examination was how these annual priorities would be determined.

¶15. Barrot said he was anxious to develop cooperation with the UNHCR, the IOM, NGOs and the future European Asylum Support Office

(expected to become operational in 2010 to carry out concrete activities with the Member states, such as selection and fact-finding missions, pre-departure orientation programs, medical screenings, travel or visa arrangements). The Commission will presumably set up a group of experts to liaise with other bodies in order to identify the target groups for the program. UNHCR Antonio Guterres, who joined ministers for discussions over lunch, expressed the "full, enthusiastic support" of his organization to the creation of the program, described as "a strategic tool" and "a burden sharing instrument" for the EU to deal with the problem of refugees.

According to the UNHCR, of the 65,000 refugees resettled in 2008, only 4,378 were resettled in a European country, compared with more than twice that many in Canada.

16. Taking questions from reporters on his reaction to the (lack of) EU response to the interception by Italy of refugees from Libya, Guterres said Libya was not currently offering conditions "that would allow for the protection of bona fide asylum-seekers to exist." He said there was a risk that people in need of international protection would be sent back to their country of origin by Libya and expressed the "reservations" of his organization. Noting that the UNHCR was currently working in Libya without official recognition, Guterres said: "It is precisely because we work in Libya that we are in a position to say that such conditions do not exist" (over there). Barrot opined on the need to have a protection mechanism on the Southern borders of the Mediterranean to prevent refugees being subject to human

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trafficking. Barrot expressed hope he will soon be able to visit Libya with Billstroem to try to make the Libyans understand that "the current situation in the Mediterranean cannot persist."

HELPING MALTA AND REINFORCING FRONTEX

17. UNHCR Guterres also voiced support for a separate Commission proposal concerning a pilot project for Malta on the internal reallocation of beneficiaries of international protection. The Commission, which sounded out countries that might be willing to take in recognized refugees from Malta, has not been very successful thus far, according to EU sources. Apart from France, which in 2009 took in 92 refugees from Malta and is willing to repeat the operation in 2010, only Portugal, Slovakia, Poland, Luxembourg, Hungary, Slovenia and possibly the Netherlands would be willing to take part. Barrot has been voicing displacements and the fight against abuse. In February 2009, the JHA Council already noted a Commission report that revealed substantial differences in the transposition and application of the Directive in the Member States.

111. Over lunch, Commission Vice-President Barrot updated ministers on the state of play concerning visa reciprocity and Canada's visa requirement imposed on Czech nationals. The Commission will present its next visa reciprocity report in October 2009.

MURRAY